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RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 4319  
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RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 3791  
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI 1943  
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RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO 2917  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 2805  
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000140

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR S/ES, INR/MR, PA  
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SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: Special Media Reaction: U/S Burns in Colombo

¶1. (U) Summary: Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns' visit to Sri Lanka January 22-24 elicited much high-profile attention from the Sri Lankan print and broadcast media on January 23 and 24. State-run media and mainstream independent media lauded the visit with the most prominence, emphasizing U.S. support for the Sri Lankan government and for Norway's peace facilitation efforts. The Sinhala nationalist press, by contrast, reported the visit in side columns, and in editorial sections reiterated its usual argument that strong words alone from the international community will not stop LTTE violence. The nationalist press also questioned Burns' assertion that the Sri Lankan government should negotiate peacefully with the LTTE while the U.S. pursues a military war on Al-Qaeda and Iraqi terrorists. Tamil media highlighted the issue of Tamil paramilitaries and Burns' contrast of the LTTE and Al-Qaeda as terrorist organizations, but also picked up his assertion that historic Tamil grievances must be addressed. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Government-owned print media in English and the vernacular languages most prominently emphasized the January 23 visit of U/S Burns to Sri Lanka with large full color photographs of the U/S with President Mahinda Rajapaksa and Norwegian Development Minister Erik Solheim. The English Daily News led with, "U.S. committed to protect Lanka's territorial integrity. LTTE using violence as its political weapon - Burns," with a second, below-the-fold headline, "U.S. supports Norwegian efforts." Mainstream independent media, such as the English Daily Mirror and the Sinhala Lankadeepa, also emphasized U.S. support for a peaceful solution.

¶3. (U) The Sinhala nationalist press, by contrast, afforded the Burns visit less prominent front page coverage than did state-controlled and mainstream media, and called for more action from the U.S. and the international community. Independently owned Sinhala daily Divaina bannered, "America's intervention imperative to bringing Tigers to the peace table, President urges the American delegate." The editorial in the English-language Island, "Needed: Deeds not words," opined that the LTTE would not respond to the international community's harsh statements. An excerpt reads: "Ironically, though Mr. Burns is exerting himself to

strengthen Sri Lanka's truce, the U.S. has flatly rejected Osama's offer of a truce, saying the only way to deal with terrorists is to put them out of business... [Burns's] presence in this country is no doubt welcome.... But it is doubtful whether he is going to fare any better than Richard Armitage, Cofer Black and Jeffrey Lunstead in trying to strengthen the much battered truce."

¶4. (SBU) Sinhala media continued to hype the possibility of U.S. military support if the island returns to civil war. Independently owned Sinhala daily Lankadeepa's second headline read: "Stern advice to the Tigers from America; America ready to provide military support if needed, says US Undersecretary." [The U/S did not offer increased military support to Sri Lanka at the press conference but did mention our ongoing modest level of security assistance.] The Sinhala media highlighted Burns' interaction with President Rajapaksa rather than his meeting with Norwegian peace facilitator Erik Solheim.

¶5. (U) Independent Tamil and pro-LTTE media ran transcripts of Burn's presser but emphasized the U/S's distinction between the LTTE and Al-Qaeda as terrorist organizations. Tamil media also highlighted Burns' comments on alleged government support for paramilitaries, and reiterated Burns' acknowledgement that the Tamil people have legitimate, historical grievances. Independent Tamil daily Thinakkural led with: "There are differences between the Liberation Tigers and Al-Qaeda - Government should not support the paramilitary groups, says the U.S. State Under Secretary." Pro-LTTE Tamil daily Sudar Oli led with: "LTTE should give up its efforts to achieve the political objectives through violence - says the U.S. State Under Secretary." Independent Tamil daily Virakesari bannered: "It is important to stop the activities of the paramilitary forces

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- There are differences between Al-Qaeda and the LTTE - says Nick Burns." Navamani, a newspaper serving the Tamil-speaking Muslim population, questioned the U.S.'s human rights record and military actions in the War on Terror at the same time Burns was urging the Sri Lankan government to negotiate peacefully with the LTTE.

¶6. (U) Both state-run and independent television stations broadcast generous footage of the Burns visit as lead or main stories. National television Rupavahini carried a full eight minutes in three stories with these headlines: "US pledges its fullest support to Sri Lanka's struggle against terrorism," "Foreign delegates now in the island begin talks with all parties on the future of the peace process," and, referring to Burns' exclusive interview to Rupavahini, "US Undersecretary stressed the LTTE should clearly understand that the international community will not assist the Tiger Organization anymore. We support the territorial integrity of Sri Lanka." Rupavahini also ran several trailers advertising its 5-minute interview with the U/S, broadcast in prime time. State-owned ITN News ran three minutes of similar coverage. In addition to his interview for state television, Burns conducted 5-minute interviews with CNN stringer Kasr Naji and with BBC London's The World radio program.

¶7. (U) Popular independent Sinhala Swarnavahini also led its news broadcast with Burns' visit for a total of 3.5 minutes of coverage, with a headline, "US intervenes to revive the peace process." Independently-owned MTV reported the visit as one of its main stories for two minutes, emphasizing Burns' condemnation of recent LTTE attacks on the military but also his acknowledgement that the Tamil people hold real historical grievances that must be addressed through dialog.

¶8. (SBU) Comment: The Sri Lankan media's blanket coverage of the Under Secretary's visit indicates acute public interest in what role the U.S. can play in helping Sri Lanka avoid war. We note that the Tamil press, by and large, also gave positive coverage to Burns' comments, emphasizing his

point that the LTTE differs from Al-Qaeda and that the government must ensure it does not aid paramilitaries. Only Navamani, a Tamil newspaper with a primarily Muslim audience, criticized alleged U.S. human rights violations in the War on Terror amidst Burns' insistence that the Sri Lankan government seek a political solution with the LTTE. The very high profile coverage of the Under Secretary's visit, coming simultaneously with the visit of Norwegian Peace Envoy Erik Solheim, publicly amplified the messages Burns came to deliver. We will monitor and report on editorial reaction to the Burns visit when it appears in the coming days. End Comment.

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